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ABSTRACT

Publishers' requests to review educators' manuscripts on the pedagogy of pluralism have prompted the author to write this paper in which he takes on the anthropological "spoiler role," contradicting generalizations in the texts by providing exceptions from ethnographic research. Admitting to some personal biases about education texts in general and multicultural texts in particular, the writer suggests that manuscripts on multiculturalism misunderstand and misuse the concept of culture and contain generalizations that do not hold up under cross-cultural examination. Expressing skepticism about the suitability of didactic instruction as an approach for achieving whatever purposes a multicultural curriculum is supposed to achieve, the author nevertheless describes some elements that he would like to see in a multicultural textbook. These include hopes that: 1) the book be anthropologically informed; 2) multiculturalism be treated as a common experience of all human beings; 3) the concept of culture be treated as a social science construct concerned with patterned regularities in human behavior; 4) attention be focused on understanding the complex nature rather than the simplicity of multiculturalism; 5) the objectives and limits of multicultural education be clear and attainable; and 6) multiculturalism address the minor differences that touch personal lives more than the great differences of unfamiliar cultures. (Author/MJL)

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Anthropology's "Spoiler Role" and "New" Multi-Cultural Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Requests from publishers to review educator-authored manuscripts dealing with the pedagogy of pluralism have caused this writer to exercise what Alan Beals refers to as anthropology's "spoiler role." The authors of these manuals on multi-culturalism seem well-meaning, but they are not anthropologically well-informed. Although expressing his personal reservations about any "textbook" approach to multiculturalism, the writer suggests how the authors of such books might at least make them more anthropologically sensitive.

ANTHROPOLOGY'S "SPOILER ROLE" AND "NEW" MULTI-CULTURAL TEXTBOOKS

I have received a spate of requests from publishers asking me to review educator-authored manuscripts dealing with the pedagogy of pluralism. These manuscripts are intended either for classroom use or, more often, for college students in teacher education programs. They are a response to current educator concerns to "do something" on behalf of cultural diversity, including the unexpected diversity introduced by recent surges of immigrant/refugee children into the public schools.

To date, my experience as a reviewer has not been a joyous one. Repeatedly I find myself exercising something akin to what Alan Beals once described as anthropology's "spoiler role" (Beals 1973:359). After carefully examining each of these particular manuscripts, my conclusion has been the same: to recommend that it not be published. The manuscripts I have reviewed are not anthropologically informed. Though there may be a ready market, even a "crying need" for such texts, I cannot accept the idea that anything is better than nothing. In this paper I discuss my collective concerns with these manuscripts, concerns that also leave me with doubts about educator efforts to deal didactically with multi-cultural/multi-ethnic issues by making them a topic for formal study.

Let me begin by noting some assumptions I make about the review process for commercial publications and some personal biases about educa-

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tion texts in general and multi-cultural texts in particular.

One assumption I make is that an invitiation to review a manuscript dealing with multi-culturalism is related to my role as a professor of education and anthropology, with emphasis on the latter. That assumption, in turn, is related to several other assumptions I make about educational textbooks. A critical one is that the education "market" is so large that education is often a special unit or subdivision in a publishing house. The editorial staff responsible for the field of education tends to be isolated from other units, like the social sciences. The same absence of dialogue between educators and social sciences that exists in academia exists in the publishing world as well. As academics or publishers, the educators usually have to fend for themselves.

On the other hand, publishers seem to recognize that although a proposed text in multi-culturalism must speak to educator concerns, it should not be anthropologically naive. While publishers may have other reviewers examining a manuscript for its pedagogy, I assume that when they send a manuscript to me they want me to "check out" the contents from the perspective of the relevant discipline. (Perhaps my dual appointment leads them to assume they'll get two reviewer perspectives for the price of one! Publishers do seem careful to obtain more than one opinion on a manuscript, however.)

Another of my assumptions is that authors and publishers alike see the field of education as the "market" for books addressing issues of multi-culturalism and cultural diversity. Such manuscripts tend to be "preachy." Chapters often conclude with lists of classroom activities or recommended supplementary reading. Whether intended for teachers or students, these are the kinds of books educators write for other educators.

They hardly write such books for anthropologists or for students of anthropology.

To be quite candid, I only read such books for money. I would not otherwise turn to Ina Corrine Brown for help in understanding the concept of culture or to John Dewey for guidance about studying what actually goes on in schools. When an educator-author cites Brown and Dewey as authoritative sources for unlocking the mysteries of culture or of schooling--and that happened within the first two pages of one manuscript I reviewed--I suspect I'm not about to witness a big breakthrough in multi-cultural understanding.

I have some other biases that influence my assessment. I feel that the field of education already has enough bad--or at least mediocre--books. I am a conservative reviewer. As a paid consultant, I am inclined to spare my client--the publisher--from the risk of publishing a poor book. That way I also spare myself and my educator colleagues--the potential consumers--from wasting our money buying it.

Another bias is concerned with multi-culturalism itself. As I see it, multi-culturalism these days is too "in," too vulnerable. There are dollars to be made. The "fed" likes it. Guilty consciences abound. Everyone recognizes that we aren't doing enough to foster the "appreciation," or at least the tolerance, of differences. A particularly attractive facet of multi-culturalism is that, in the argot of our time, it is "a heavy trip" you can "lay on someone else." "They" rather than "we" are the problem; "we" should help "them" do something about it (and preferably Monday thru Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.). The times are ripe--alas, too ripe--for anyone who claims even the least expertise in multi-culturalism. The result is that the topic has already received too many words and too little thought (for a noteworthy exception, see Gibson 1976).

I also feel a strong sense of reserve for holding schools formally responsible for instruction about multi-culturalism. By the second day of kindergarten I think I had learned to mouth lofty ideas about brotherhood. If my classroom experience from then on contributed to my interpersonal sensitivity, it was through watching my peers and my teachers cope with both the quick kids and the slow ones, the clean ones and the dirty ones, the hill people and the valley people. It was not in learning to mouth cliches about how children in other circumstances or other lands were "just like us," when it was quite apparent that they were different. (Do we live in enlightened times simply because teachers in training are now required by law to receive instruction in inter-cultural understanding? What remarkable faith we maintain in our ability to legislate tolerance!)

Given my biases, it's hard to take on the task of reviewing multi-cultural texts with great enthusiasm. The best I have been able to do is to exercise the "spoiler role," faulting would-be authors for statements that do not hold up under cross-cultural examination and, more importantly, faulting them for their seeming misconceptions regarding what culture is all about.

Alan Beals suggests that one of the functions of anthropological research has been to play a spoiler role, contradicting broad generalizations by providing exceptions from the ethnographic record, of the sort: "It's not so in my village" (Beals 1973:359).*

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*A good example of the "spoiler role" in the sense that Beals describes it appears in a 1966 article written by Melford Spiro, "Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma" (American Anthropologist 68:1163-1173). Spiro is here objecting to a too-sweeping explanation proposed elsewhere:

> At the risk of playing the parochial anthropologist I must exempt "my village"--a village in Upper Burma--from the putative explanatory net of this concept (p. 1163).

Manuscripts on multiculturalism seem to call forth the spoiler function only in regard to errors of generalization but to the way the concept of culture is itself bandied about. There is probably no better example than the misguided, but often mentioned, idea of a "pluralistic culture." Pluralistic socities, yes; pluralistic cultures, emphatically no!

For another example of the abuse of the cultural concept, consider this strangely equivocal statement that I came across in one manuscript: "Individuals may very well be part of more than one cultural group." In a dozen words students are presented with the incorrect idea that cultures are like clubs one can become "part of," yet they are left quite on their own to figure out whether the phrase "may very well be" means that most people only "join" one cultural group or that most people have multiple memberships --like Master Charge and Visa. To further confound the issue, the same author went on to reassure readers that by gender alone we are all differentiated into one of "two large cultural groups," male and female. That idea represents a classic misunderstanding of the culture concept. The author did not stop there, however, but quickly went on to assure readers that their efforts to understand their own culture--with culture referred to in the singular this time--are requisite for understanding "the cultures of larger societies." Perhaps the intent of such sentences is to encourage us that our understanding of culture--whether "men culture" or the "cultures of larger societies"--is just around the corner. But their effect on me is to raise the suspicion that such authors do not really know what they are talking about.

Clifford Geertz, in his essay "Thick Description," cautions that to insure the continued importance of the culture concept we should be concerned with cutting it down to size rather than undermining it Geertz 1973:4). My reading of multi-cultural manuscripts suggests that their

probably-well-intentioned authors are not sufficiently aware of the problems inherent in trying to define culture. They would not have the least idea of what Geertz means by trying to cut it down to size. Indeed, they do just the opposite, puffing culture up so that it becomes their magic phrase, their "black box," their unexplained explanation. I think it was Geertz who referred to culture as a vast and undifferentiated variable. But Geertz, like other anthropologists, would not take that as license to treat "culture" any way he liked; he would take excessive care to explain what he meant. And Geertz (to a greater extent than some anthropologists) would lead us inductively to look through the particular frame of reference of particular others as a way of showing us how we variously wear--and change--some cultural lenses of our own.

TRANSCENDING THE SPOILER ROLE

Given my skepticism about either the classroom as the proper arena or didactic instruction as a suitable approach for achieving whatever purposes a multi-cultural/multi-ethnic curriculum is supposed to achieve, it should not surprise you to learn that I have no ambitions about writing a text for this market. I do not expect to transcend the spoiler role. Whatever influence I can exert will be limited to rigorous review. My preference in that regard is to review manuscripts as an anonymous publishers' reviewer, to "take the money and run." If the manuscripts I have seen are the best in the offing, I'll continue advising publishers not to publish.

Although I do not intend to transcend the spoiler role, and do not personally believe that textbooks can lead us to cultural awareness, I will not stand in the way of any author who does seem to address

multi-culturalism in an informed, honest, and helpful way.* If I happen to be a publisher's reviewer for such a book, here are some elements that might assuage my underlying doubts about whether the enterprise should be undertaken at all.

First, I would expect the book to be anthropologically informed, though I would not insist that the anthropology be all that explicit or that an anthropologist must author it. My preference would be for a book that approached "culture" inductively (but not ambiguously) and that was rich with anecdotal material. Perhaps some author will devise a way to develop major points by returning again and again to vignettes in the lives of a few real--or at least believable--individuals from diverse cultural settings, utilizing what Geertz refers to as "the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers" (Geertz 1973:16).

Second, I would prefer to see multi-culturalism portrayed as a common experience of all humans, along the lines suggested by Ward Goodenough and developed in his essay, "Multi-culturalism as the Normal Human Experience" (Goodenough 1976). "All human beings," Goodenough reminds us, "live in what for them is a multi-cultural world..." and must develop "varying degrees of multi-cultural competence in at least some micro-cultures" (p.5).

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*For example, John Collier, Jr., at San Francisco State University, in collaboration with Marilyn Laatsch, is presently completing a manuscript directed to teachers in multi-ethnic urban classrooms and to educational planners addressing the issue EDUCATION FOR MULTI-ETHNICITY. Collier related to me that the word "FOR" in the title represents the breakthrough in his thinking about this study and is a response to the cry from the ethnic community for education to strengthen their children's cultural identity and their ties with family and community (John Collier, personal communication 1980). Unlike the vague and hortatory style of the books I have been asked to review, this one promises to look at real teachers and students and thus offers hope of staying realistically in touch with everyday classroom life.

Third, I would prefer to see the concept of culture treated not as an invisible and heavy-handed force pulling people about by their noses but as a construct of the social scientist that enables us to talk about patterned regularities in human behavior, just as grammar is a construct of the linguist that helps us talk about patterned regularities in human speech. Non-anthropologists have a tendency to describe culture as something one can "join" or "belong to," confusing "culture" with "society," creating the impression that one can simply go around acquiring cultures willy nilly, and implying that a "good citizen" collects cultures the way Boy Scouts collect merit badges. To keep my students (including doctoral students) from falling into this easy trap, I have sometimes found it helpful (even necessary) to forbid them from using the word "culture" at all. Instead, I insist that in any sentence in which they were tempted to use that term they substitute a term that conveys more precisely what they are referring to, be it custom, tradition, habit, shared meaning, expectation, role-norm, or a whole ideational system or world view.

I would be quite impressed with an author who could write a text on multi-culturalism without ever using the term "culture." To me, such a feat would be truly innovative and remarkably refreshing. It would certainly smoke out those educator authors--and they may be in the majority--who think that the only locus of culture is in ethnic identities!

However, I would be satisfied simply to see a text in which culture is treated as an abstraction, and in which the author recognizes that the abstraction can be applied at multiple levels. Those levels can range from micro-cultures of hippie ghettos, classrooms, cocktail waitresses, or the members of bomber squadrons or anthropology departments, to the

level of "national" or "macro-cultures" where our language, beliefs, and meanings are understood by impressive proportions of the world's human population (cf. Goodenough 1976; 1981). In my opinion, no author who claims to point the way for multi-cultural education can do so without recognizing that, at least in terms of micro-cultures, we are all multi-cultural!

Frustrated as I am by a sentence such as "Individuals may very well be part of more than one cultural group," I think that anthropologists themselves must be held largely responsible for the confusion. They have never quite succeeded in conveying either the limits or the potential of their most central and critical concept: culture. Or at least they have not successfully demonstrated the utility of the concept for understanding contemporary behavior in complex societies to anywhere near the extent they have demonstrated its utility in looking at behavior in small, intact, relatively isolated preliterate ones.

Fourth, I would like to see thoughtful attention given to processes of social boundary maintenance--including the functional as well as the dysfunctional aspects of prejudice, bigotry and intolerance. I think it important to understand why people cling tenaciously to old traditions and first languages, why they develop and transmit strong in-group feelings, to understand how stereotyping and prejudices--including the systematic transmission of misinformation about other groups--may help people preserve cherished ways of believing and acting that are likely to be in jeopardy under conditions of cultural contact. It seems to me that any discussion of multi-culturalism should create more appreciation for the complexity of the problem than for the simplicity of the answer.

Fifth--though perhaps this is too much to hope for in texts designed to capture the market--I would like to see questions raised about the

simplistic idea that "to know people is to love them." Divorce statistics suggest this is not necessarily the case in interpersonal relationships; across cultural boundaries maybe we should make more of the fact that humans are neither intrinsically lovable--nor admirable. (In fact, if we were to succeed even in making them understandable, we'd all be out of business!) Why keep it a secret that anthropologists have often had to muster all their personal and professional resources to maintain the "deferred judgment" expected of them in fieldwork? Back home in their departments I've watched them "eat alive" their students and, far more devastatingly, their professional colleagues. The objectives (and limits) of multi-cultural education need to be both clear and attainable. If real anthropologists in their real worlds can be used as models, then the goals fo cultural understanding can be set rather modestly. Will anyone ever start there?

Sixth and last, if multi-cultural understanding is to be "a game everybody can play," I would like to see authors call more attention to how we address the minor differences that touch our personal lives every day rather than make so much of big differences that touch our lives hardly at all. The real lessons of multi-culturalism are taught and learned as we watch those closest to us cope with our own local "wierdos," not how they regard Eskimos or Aborigines or the entirety of sub-Saharan Africa. The lessons of tolerance are derived and displayed through what we and others say and do about eccentricities among our own family members and the lovers of hard rock who live next door, rowdy kids on skateboards and juveniles on motorcycles, welfare mothers and unemployed fathers, overly-ambitious classmates and "underly" ambitious colleagues, the different and the indifferent. Are Americans any different from others in their attitude toward differences? In opportunities for

travel around the world, I've found that Americans are often regarded as being remarkably tolerant toward others. One would not think so by reading the manuscripts I have seen.

There you have it: why I play the "spoiler role" and what I think it would take for me to be more enthusiastic toward manuscripts on multi-culturalism. Playing the spoiler role during a period of renewed interest in achieving cultural awareness and at a moment of critical educator concern for an influx of refugee and immigrant children is not terribly satisfying and not in the least constructive or creative. Nevertheless, I take it to be a serious responsibility in the anthropology of education to insure that when educators turn to anthropology to inform their practice, that practice is truly informed.

Endnotes:

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Denver on March 21, 1980. The paper was part of the symposium on "Innovative Approaches to Anthropology and Education" organized by Helen H. Schuster.
2. In another paper presented at the same meeting, Edith W. King and Peter Van Arsdale, both of the University of Denver, described a combined research and action program in a paper titled "Teaching in the Ethnically Diverse Classroom: Implications for Educational Anthropology." Their program, enlisting an anthropologist as an information source for teachers, illustrates an alternative to the text book approach discussed in my paper. My suggestion to anthropologists invited to participate in such programs is to combine their assigned role of informant with their traditional role of fieldworker, making every effort to learn how both teachers and students attempt to make sense out of their unexpectedly strange circumstances.

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